

# Whitewashing History in Arizona

The dispute over Arizona's shutting down of ethnic studies programs that cite white exploitation of Chicano and Indian communities has focused on the impact on Mexican-American children, but the new policy also affects Native American students, as Bill Means explains to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Arizona is closing public school ethnic studies programs that accuse whites of oppressing Chicanos and Native Americans on the grounds that these historical lessons constitute racist hate speech. But scholars and activists are protesting the state's latest move as racist itself because it keeps students from these communities from learning about their own history and heroes.

Bill Means, co-founder of the American Indian Movement and a member of the board of the International Treaty Council, describes the impact of the state-pressured shutting down of Tucson's Chicano studies program and the banning of books used in the curriculum. Arizona has the largest concentration of Native people in the country.

DB: What was your first thought, what was going through your mind, what was your reaction when you heard that they not only banned the Ethnic Studies for Mexican-American children and Indigenous children, but they had the teachers pack up the books in boxes, right in front of the students, some of them crying and then gave the teachers, 48 hours to figure out what they're going to teach? Your response.

BM: My response is, this reminds me of the days when they were talking about turning the fire hoses and the dogs loose on the marchers for civil rights, down in Alabama and Mississippi, in the South during the Sixties. It's almost getting to that point in the sense of the denial of rights.

I mean the freedom to read, the freedom to speak, the freedom to write the foundation of freedom in America. This is what makes us a diverse and rich culture. And so it was a shock. I was shocked and dismayed by this continuation of racist policies that seem to be coming out of Arizona.

As you recall, the day we just celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Day. Arizona was certainly the last to endorse it as a national holiday. And then we got into the various laws they passed where they could arrest you on your skin color, stop you and now this is just another step where it looks like they're trying to create a gated community in the entire state of Arizona.

DB: How do you see the community that you represent affected in this situation? It seems they want a white-only policy there.

BM: Well, that's exactly right and especially in view of the fact that Arizona has the largest number of Indian children in school in the entire nation. The largest number of Indian people, both on reservations, in urban areas. Arizona has even elected several legislators from predominantly Indian districts.

So we see that this is another attack on the sovereignty and the culture of the American Indian. And it's very, very disturbing to Indian people because we consider Spanish-speaking people to be Indians as well. And so it's very appalling and very detrimental to the children of Arizona, especially Indigenous people.

To hear that some of the names of their heroes, authors who spell out the true history of treaties, authors who spell out the contributions of Indian people to American society, authors who talk about the land tenure, the land history in the state of Arizona. These are all subjects. The environmental issues, the extractions of resources which has contaminated a lot of the water and land of state of Arizona. The militarization on the borders, all these things seem to go to the extreme in Arizona.

It's as if the right-wing has said, "We're going to take over Arizona, whether anybody likes it or not, we're going to pass these draconian laws that totally annihilate what's little is left of the First Amendment." So it's very, very racist. It's taking America back. It's ignoring the contributions of Indigenous people to the well-being of the state of Arizona. And in particular, it's an insult to the intelligence of all Americans.

DB: Why is it important for Indian people to have access to the writers in the community. What does it mean to an Indian child say to, either have access, or not have access. How are kids affected by this?

BM: Well, I think what happens without this we have aculturation, assimilation, it becomes a racist policy because Indian people feel we are relegated to a lower class of people. We have no heroes, we have none of our own people we can look up to and say "This is what they said, this is what their book has documented." So it's very detrimental to the mental well-being, the educational well-being, the character-building of Indigenous youth and children. And it's one of the atrocities of the modern day, that is being committed in the educational systems of Arizona.

DB: Now you are, of course, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement. You are on the board of the International Treaty Council. And you've

been working and know perhaps more than anybody else in this world about international law in the context of Indigenous communities. Do you see this issue in Arizona also as an issue for the United Nations, as an issue that affects people in the hemisphere and around the world?

BM: Oh, yes, as we speak we have our staff attorney from not only International Indian Treaty Council but many of the Indigenous, non-governmental organizations affiliated with the United Nations in North America looking into the legalities, looking into this policy. Because this was not the first time, education has continually been, since Columbus got here, a weapon of colonization, to limit the education. They used to have a national policy that said something to the effect that "We have to kill the Indian, and educate him in the white ways."

And so that's reason why this policy of putting our people in boarding schools, isolated, on reservations, comparable to the bantustans of South Africa, [controlling] our children's curricula up until as late at 1972, and AIM founded the first Indian-controlled school in America. Our education was controlled, either by the church or the federal government. So we've been fighting this battle of education, of censorship, since 1492.

DB: We're talking about the banning of books in Tucson and the banning of the ethnic studies programs for Mexican-Americans, Indigenous communities, isolating those communities really from the school system. Bill Means, when you were coming up, did you have access to the literature of your people, was this an issue for you? How were you affected?

BM: I was affected just like the people of Arizona. We were not given access to books about our language. We were not given access to books written by Indian authors. It was not until I went to higher education, to college, that college professors began to introduce me to some of the writers that are banned here in Arizona such as Vine Deloria, one of the most noted scholars, historian, treaty rights advocate, attorney, that has ever existed in modern-day Indian country. And now they defame, and degrade his life, and his study, by banning his books, which, in fact, were revolutionary for their time. But that was only in the Sixties so this is something that we face and have faced for a long time.

And, as for myself, growing up in boarding school everything was set. The library was very small, our access to even an open library, let alone some other types of institutions of higher learning was limited. And so I think this is just a continuation of colonial racist policy that was begun to colonize and restrict the culture of Indigenous people all over the world so that they could take our resources, limit our education, write the treaties in one language, not use any kind of interpreter. So this goes back for centuries but now to have it raise its head in this time and age when we have the First Amendment, the civil

rights struggle, the Indian's rights movement. It's very insulting, and it's very, very, shall we say, inspirational for us to want to organize against this type of racist policy.

DB: Could you talk about the impact of those schools on the Indigenous community?

BM: Well, I think, now the public school system, here, and I don't mean Minnesota but throughout the upper Midwest and, indeed, most states across the country has engaged the idea that culture can be an enrichment. That the identity of one's culture, the teaching of the true history and contributions of Indigenous people is for the benefit of the overall population of our state. And because we had limited access to that education, and now we've gone as far as the United Nations to create the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Sept. 13th, 2007, passed by the General Assembly. So it's an international human rights issue, it's not just a civil rights issue.

Because I think that, you know, as we look back in the history of poverty, one of the ways to keep people in poverty whether it's a bantustan or a reservation is to limit and restrict the access to education, a total lack of self-determination, a total colonial system where only things that are approved by the colonists are things that can be taught at school. And so are we regressing in society to allow this to happen? To have an education based on your income?

It's only since the Sixties, the Fifties, that poor people have had access to development of their own studies, be it African studies, Indian studies, Chicano studies. This has not been here for very long in America. And so to see this set back, to see this reactionary type of implementation of colonial policy, racist policy is, it takes your breath away, it makes, you know, both anger, both determination to do something, become involved, because this was one of the main enemies of Indian people throughout, has been education. And especially, not only just Indian, but poor peoples throughout America.

DB: In that context, not long ago you took members of the United Nations around to various reservations and Indian communities and there was an investigation of the abuse and the poverty, and the lack of proper education happening in the Indigenous communities in the United States. I assume that this is a strike against that attempt to educate the world, educate the members of the United Nations, and I guess this battle needs to continue. Newt Gingrich is saying "Let them be janitors." What do you say?

BM: Yeah, exactly that's why we formed the American Indian Movement, to break down those walls of racism, those barriers to a good cross section, cultural education. To be exposed to the great writers of history and I think that as we

look to what's happening, in the world, as we look to the developments at the U.N., the United States is being investigated by the committee, it's called The Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, within the Commission on Human Rights.

And so that will be coming, and starting in this year. The special rapporteur of Indigenous issues, who by the way is a professor, an Indian at the University of Arizona, is going to be going across the United States to take testimony on as to how the United States is implementing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and other human rights instruments of the United Nations.

You can imagine that Arizona has painted themselves into a corner on the issue of human rights, especially as it pertains to censorship, especially as it pertains to restricting the education access of children. Mind you, these are the most vulnerable people in our society. We all, whether we're Republican, Democrat, it seems like we want the best for our children. We don't want what's limited, and these are the witnesses that we're going to have testify before this special rapporteur on Indigenous issues. His name is Professor James Anaya, who's the special rapporteur of the third committee that I mentioned, the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. He'll be visiting various parts of North America in April and one of the hearings will be definitely in Arizona.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with the author at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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## Arizona Shuts Mexican Studies Classes

Amid Arizona's crackdown on people of Mexican descent, state officials are closing down Mexican-American studies programs and banning history books that tell of white oppression against Native Americans and Chicanos, a topic that Dennis J. Bernstein discussed with author Rodolfo Acuña.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Dr. Rodolfo Acuña – author, educator, historian and social activist – has been on the front lines in the battle over Arizona's banning of books on Chicano history and the shutting down of Mexican-American Studies programs in the state's public schools. The banned books include his landmark work, *Occupied*

*America, A History of Chicanos.*

Often referred to as the father of Chicano Studies, Dr. Acuña co-founded the Chicano and Chicana Studies Department at the California State University at Northridge in 1969. He has taught for over 40 years at California State University, Northridge, and has become the standard-bearer in Chicano Studies classes throughout the United States.

*Occupied America* was first published in 1972 and is currently in its seventh edition, an exhaustive work that documents the history of Chicanos. He has also authored *The Story of Mexican-American Community Under Siege, A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945 – 1975*, and most recently *The Making of Chicano Studies in the Trenches of Academia*.

Much of what Dr. Acuña has done in his life is now under assault in Arizona where right-wing officials have clamped down on classes teaching public school students about the history of white oppression directed against Native Americans and Chicanos. Claiming that this teaching of history stirs anti-white resentments, the state officials forced the banning of certain books and termination of the classes.

DB: What was your initial response when you heard that your book, a crucial book in terms of this history was banned in Tucson.

RA: First of all, they have been trying to do this now for many years. It is not something that is new. Since at least 2006, they have been trying to ban the book. But I was a little bit irritated when it happened, but I knew it was coming.

DB: Alright, say a little bit more about what you think is behind this. Why do they want to get rid of such a landmark book that has meant so much to so many young people in this country and who really needed their history told? Tell us about what you think is going on here.

RA: Well, I think right now there is anti-Mexican climate there, but even more fundamental is that Arizona has almost been completely privatized. How do you keep the prison industry going? By having people inside them. So you have the anti-immigrant feeling and also the anti-Mexican feeling because they fill up the jails.

For example, in the schools, the charter schools are mostly white. And who go to these mostly privatized schools are white kids who are afraid that they are going to go to school, or their parents are afraid they're going to go to school with Mexicans.

So consequently it's a, just a Catch-22 situation. And I think that there's an awful lot of money behind it, also hate sells. If you want to go to political office, higher political office in Arizona, you do Mexican baiting. And this is what you do. You bait Mexicans. You are pro-immigration, you see the Republican candidates today. I mean everybody is afraid to say, "Let's have some equity." Everybody is anti-Mexican. Build higher walls, electrify them, do this and do that. So it's an opportunism of the politicians.

Also, it keeps money coming into Arizona. The Tea Party, for example, is under the control of the Koch brothers. And the Koch brothers, even [Mitt] Romney says are the engine of the Tea Party. So there are many reasons why you have these anti-Mexican things. They say that the law 2281 was passed and it was supposed to include all ethnic studies, but it's only being enforced against Mexican-Americans. Why? And I think that it's obvious. Is that they are the largest group, they are the most threatening group, and they are the group that are the most vociferous.

DB: You know, professor, when I was down in Tucson broadcasting from there, we interviewed a number of students about how important these books were and we heard the story from one student who said that she had actually tried to take her own life growing up as a young Chicana in that state, and then came along this history, and this book, and she said it was a life-saver for her. Could you talk about what you understand, how this book has had an impact, and why you wrote it particularly for the young people. You are still a teacher now.

RA: Yes, I still am. I'm 79. But you know, it's not only the book, it's the whole program. What people don't understand about the Mexican-American Studies Program there is that it's a pedagogy. It's a way to get people to feel proud of themselves, to motivate them to stay in school and motivate them to go on. You have hardly any drop-out. It's negligible with the Mexican-American Studies Program. In Arizona, you have a 50 to 60 percent drop-out rate of Mexicans and this is the only program that has been successful in keeping them from dropping out.

And it's a tragedy because most people know that people who drop out of school have a higher propensity of going to jail and to prison than people who finish high school and go on to college. And so I think that what this book does, it motivates people, it put them into history, a history, they are part of history. And this is very important for them. It's very important for anyone. It's important for a black person, it's important for an Asian person, it's important for any person to feel that they are part of society.

DB: You wrote this book in 1972. What was the initial response? Was there anything like it at the time? And what was the initial response when it came

out?

RA: Well, the response was mixed. I think among Chicanos it was very good. It was not very good with many of the professional historians at the time although I now do reviews for *The American Historical Review*, for the *Pacific Historical Review*, and an awful lot of reviews. But I remember at this time people would ask me questions at conferences, "Why do you write with such emotion?" I told them because I'm not a prostitute. I do the act with emotion and when there's people being hanged, lynched, when there are people that are being subjugated, then I get emotional about it and I want to change it.

DB: Can you talk a little bit about what was there for you when you were coming up. Does this, does the writing of this and the creating of this history come out of your own experience of a need for something like this, and did you have something in your time?

RA: What motivated me is that I'm a teacher. I've been teaching for over 55 years and I saw the need for students to have books, my first three books were for the public schools. The first two books that I wrote were for elementary schools and the third book was for high school. I had to have a tool that I could use to supplement my classroom activity.

The same thing with *Occupied America*. I was teaching in Chicano Studies, some of the first Chicano classes. I had classes of mostly Mexican students and I wanted to motivate them to go on to college, to graduate school, when I was teaching at the university level. And so consequently I had to have an instrument and I looked around and the only book that was around was [by] Carey McWilliams, a very good book but it didn't cover the Fifties and it didn't cover the Sixties. So I had to have something more current.

That's why I wrote the book. I wrote the book so it would supplement my teaching. Later on the book changed. I've written seven editions. Every edition is different and it reflects the questions that are brought up in the classroom.

DB: You've always seen activism and education as deeply intertwined. After the official banning of the books, students in Tucson are mobilizing to defend Ethnic Studies, in an attempt to shift the anti-Mexican climate in Arizona and throughout the country. Do you think it's important and how do you see fight unfolding? Is it time to gather in Tucson? What kinds of actions do you see as important in this context?

RA: Well, first of all I wish the professionals, the Chicanos who are professionals were as committed as the students. I think the students are doing something that is vital. Arizona, right now, is being picked off. And the thing



that most people don't understand about it is that most of the legislators in Arizona are in the process of trying to nullify the U.S. Constitution. And the only thing that students can do, and this is their motto "Fight back." And they are fighting back. They've taken over the school district, they've taken to the streets. They know if they don't fight back they are going to be led to those intellectual ovens.

DB: You said "those intellectual ovens" ... say a little bit more about that image and why you are using such a strong image.

RA: It's a very strong image and I think that when you don't have a future, when you can't go on to school, when you are stuck and the only alternative that you have is prison I think you are in an intellectual oven. I think a person who is taking drugs because of low self-image because of just, the times, the hopelessness is in an intellectual oven.

DB: I think that what is extraordinary is how successful this program was in Tucson. In the Tucson public school system, which is about 61 percent Mexican-American, Chicano, Chicana people. It was incredibly effective at keeping kids in school, in inspiring and encouraging them to go on to higher education. By every standard, it measures up to what we would want an effective program to be. So it would appear that they are trying to shred kids where they live and learn and grow. Could you talk about what that means to you, and just comment on that?

RA: [Arizona's superintendent of public instructions John Huppenthal] ran on the ticket that he was going to abolish Ethnic Studies or Mexican-American Studies. Once he got in he said, I'm gonna have a private study, I'm going to commission a study, I'm going to pay \$177,000 for this study and in this study I'm going to see if the program is effective, if the program is un-American, if the program is patriotic, if the program is racist.

The study came back afterwards, and it said that the schools were patriotic, that the schools were American, that they were not racist. Then they went through books like mine. And they said *Occupied America* is a standard American text book. And so consequently he says it is not racist, it is not unpatriotic, it's not un-American and it is a very respected text book. So the report goes back to John Huppenthal, who had said that he's going to base his opinion on this study.

And so he then said "Well, I don't believe it because I've heard" ... you know hearsay ... "I've heard that it's not." Then he takes it up to a commissioner. A commissioner is somebody who is appointed, usually with the support and the imprimatur of the attorney general. Well, the Attorney General is Tom Horne who

had introduced this law, 2281. So then he says well the commissioner came back and he said "Well, I think that Huppenthal is right." Duh.

And so consequently then he abolishes the program. He abolishes the program although the program was endorsed by Unitary Plan that the Tucson Unified School District was under. And this Unitary Program said that they should have a Mexican-American Studies program as a way to desegregate the schools and to improve the education of Mexicans. And it's still under that order but the federal courts are not enforcing the law. So consequently it gets to be very frustrating.

DB: You were referring to Tom Horne, he's the current Attorney General. Many attribute this action to a vendetta that he has been holding against Dolores Huerta for going to Tucson and pointing out that in her perspective that the white people here hate brown and black people, indigenous people and she was, from her point of view, calling it like it was. Now Tom Horne comes back and ends this system. Do you see this as part of sustaining that vendetta?

RA: Well, it went before, beyond that vendetta. Tom Horne was a failed lawyer. And so he wanted to get elected to office. And he found that the best way to do it was to bait Mexicans. And the best way to get money was to sell himself. So even before Dolores said that, he looked at it as a method or way of improving his career. And this is the reason that he used it. And you have to look at Arizona. You have an awful lot of people over 55 who have come here from other states, who have gone there from other states, they are afraid of Mexicans. Mexicans make up about 43 percent of the school children today in Arizona. And they know that they are going to be the majority and so running for white xenophobes...

DB: And in Tucson it's over 60 percent in the school system, in Tucson, yes, go on.

RA: And the Phoenix school is less, but the Tucson schools are way more than a majority Mexicans.

DB: Now one really has to ask the question, in terms of the real politics going on here.

RA: I think [President Barack] Obama doesn't want to do anything that is going to upset any of the white establishment there. The best thing that Mexicans could do is take to the streets when he's in Arizona to show their displeasure with his policies and the lack of enforcement of federal laws.

DB: And finally, the brutality here of the action is amazing in which they have teachers having to boxing these books up in front of these students. One teacher

we interviewed last week said she was given 48 hours, two days off, they got a substitute for her, to think about what she's going to teach because they essentially stripped her of her curriculum and took away the books. We hear reports of kids crying in the classroom. This is a pretty brutal message and now they want, I guess they want to institute, and this is coming up, the Newt Gingrich policy of having these kids become janitors in the schools. What would your advice be to teachers who are teaching in classrooms all around this country?

RA: Well, first of all, the other teachers in other places should support the Tucson people. They should do something about it. They should be visible, they shouldn't be quiet because this is going to happen to them. And they are quiet, they're not doing, I don't know of a teacher organization that has come out against this. I don't know of a library association that has come out against censorship.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with the author at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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## Banning Books in Tucson

Right-wing white politicians in Arizona have struck back at ethnic-studies programs in Tucson public schools by banning books that teach children about white oppression of Native Americans and Chicanos, a decision that Dennis J. Bernstein discussed with Carlos Muñoz, a pioneer of such scholarship.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Outrage and disgust continue to build over the decision by the Tucson, Arizona, unified school system to ban books by Chicano and Native-American authors. The punitive action follows on the heels of the decision by state politicians to shut down Tucson highly effective ethnic studies program that focused on Mexican-American life and culture.

Over 60 percent of the students in Tucson are of Mexican descent and the program was widely regarded as an educational success. However, the program drew the ire of some Arizona whites who were offended by lessons about white oppression of Chicanos and Native-Americans.

Among the banned books are *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* by Rodolfo Acuña, *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures* edited by Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican Civil Rights Movement* by Arturo Rosales, *Critical Race Theory* by Richard Delgado, and books by Native-American writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Winona Laduke.

The decisions to ban the books followed a 4-to-1 vote on Jan. 17 by the Tucson Unified School District board to cave in to the State of Arizona, and to put an end to Mexican-American Studies.

According to various news reports, and interviews with teachers directly affected by the book ban, the banned books were seized from classrooms right in front of students. The teachers were given a couple of days to figure out what to teach in place of the Mexican Ethnic studies curriculum. Some students in these classes were reported to be in tears as the books were packed up and shipped off to a book depository.

I spoke on Wednesday with Dr. Carlos Muñoz, one of the key pioneers in Ethnic Studies and Chicano Studies in the country. Dr. Muñoz was the founding chair of the first Chicano Studies Department in the nation in 1968, at the California State University at Los Angeles, and the founding chair of the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

He is a pioneer in the creation of undergraduate and graduate curricula in the disciplines of Ethnic Studies and the author of numerous pioneering works on the Mexican-American political experience and on African-American and Latino political coalitions. His book, *Youth, Identify, Power, the Chicano Movement* won the Gustavus Myers Book Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Study of Human Rights in the United States.

DB: Well it's good to have you with us, although it's a terrible situation and this thing, believe it or not, started to unfold on Martin Luther King's birthday celebration. Let me get your initial response to what happened here. What were you thinking? What went through your mind?

CM: Well you know, I don't have the words to express my anger at what's taken place in Tucson, Arizona. It's just simply unbelievable. I mean never did I expect at this point in time, in history, after over 40 years of scholarship that has been generated and published and being taught in universities across this country, specifically on the Chicano experience in the United States.

Scholars of Mexican-American background and other people of color, scholars of color, have collectively made a profound, profound contribution to the body of

knowledge of people of color in this country – and have rectified, and documented a history that speaks the truth of what this country has been historically as an empire, a promoter of imperialism throughout the world, as a racist white-supremacist nation as witnessed by the so-called Founding Fathers who were [in many cases] slave owners, you know, and this kind of truth doesn't speak well to what's going on in Arizona.

Because I think that the people who are there, responsible for this particular tragedy in public education, are either ignorant and never attended a university, and never were educated, and/or are members of the Tea Party or some other extreme racist organizations that are promoting anti-Mexican racist hysteria. So I think what we see here, as I see it anyway, is a situation where right-wingers have collectively organized there and make this an issue, because as a manifestation of the perceived threat, of what I call, the "brown invasion" as has been capsulized by a lot of the right-wing politicians in this country. The increasing, of what I call, demographic revolution that we are witnessing right now has become a threat to many people in power, especially in Arizona.

As you know, they are the ones who started this whole process of criminalizing Mexican undocumented workers, you know, and have set the tone for other states to follow that are under the tutelage of right-wing political folks. So I think it is something that needs to be protested. People have to take to the streets, as they are doing in Tucson. It is something that is an issue that has become, I think, very, very critical and deserves the support of all Americans, regardless of race, ethnic backgrounds. It is just ridiculous.

DB: One of the things that people who work within the system, we were speaking with teachers and students, is that it was an incredibly effective program in which students were succeeding, students who were dropping out before were staying in school, and going on to higher education. Could you talk about how that happens, why it's so important for these students and the school system there is 61 percent Mexican-American? Why it's so important, say a little bit more about that.

CM: Well, you know, I think in any process of education if you are a student and you don't hear about people like yourself in the making of history in this nation you are bound to feel somewhat inferior, you know what I mean? I've gone through that when I was a kid. My God, it's all white history, and all the heroes were white. And you never hear about the good things that were done by folks of color in our society, in the building of this nation.

And so it's been, prior to the emergence of Ethnic Studies and Chicano Studies in the universities there were no books about the Chicano experience. The

consequence of that, as I witnessed earlier, if I experienced it was an inferiority complex, you know. My God, you know, all we hear about Mexicans, for example, they are criminals, you know, they are drunkards, you know, the women are whores, you know. There comes all these racist, negative stereotypes that are promoted in the movies and television, newspapers. So the consequence of that was historically, what I call the colonization of the mind, where young people of Mexican descent were pushed into thinking that they were inferior, the culture was inferior.

Now, what's happened in Tucson, has been a remarkable, remarkable process of deep colonization where the issues that have been presented there in public schooling have been taken on by teachers, staff members, and the school district who have had the courage to develop a program of Mexican-American studies. The first, by the way, the only one in the whole country at the public school level. A remarkable feat that ought to be celebrated and be set up as, you might say, an example of what other public school systems, including those of us here in California, those systems here, ought to pursue.

And the consequences have been remarkable, as you mentioned, the fact that in Tucson, Mexican-American studies program has resulted in a radical turnabout in terms of young people taking pride, becoming proud of their heritage, becoming proud of the fact that they learned that they come from ancestors who have made contributions, profound contributions to civilizations throughout the Americas. I mean that fact alone is incredible, an intangible contribution to boosting the feeling of being worthy as human beings. And that kind of feeling is very, very important to have in order for young people to succeed in life, beyond public school.

So I think what has been done in Arizona by these white politicians has been an effort to return to the days of the 1950s, previous to the Chicano movement and other civil rights movements in this country to try to "Americanize" and re-colonize the minds of young people in the state of Arizona.

DB: You know banning this program in Tucson is almost like banning the speaking of Spanish in Mexico. Anybody who has spent time in Tucson and Nogales, Arizona understands how prevalent, I mean, it's Mexico but it's called the United States. Now they did this in front of the students. The decision was made for the teachers to be boxing the books up in front of the students, shipping them out for storage. Kids were crying.

I remember when I was down there in Tucson, we were broadcasting from there one young student told me that she was really thinking about suicide and had actually tried to take her own life once until she got into a program like this and began to feel alive. Could you comment on that?

CM: This is an example of what I was referring to. When young people are awakened by educators to who they really are, where they come from, and why it is a source of pride, or should be a source of pride. I mean, it's incredible, you cannot put value on that kind of influential discovery and awakening of a young mind. It makes a world of difference to a young person, to find meaning in their lives, that carries them forth towards a positive direction in society. They become good citizens and critical-thinking people that are going to make contributions to the betterment of the society as a whole.

DB: You know, one has to believe, or gets the strong feeling that they really don't want these students to succeed because the program was so successful. The amount of, the percentage of students who ended up going to college as a result of this kind of study was overwhelming and one has to think that this is an attempt to cripple, undermine and keep these kids down rather than to cheerlead the fact that they are getting better, things are getting better and they are really succeeding. It's racism at the core, wouldn't you say?

CM: I agree. I wholeheartedly agree. And I think, to add to that, what I see here is that with regards to the demographics that Arizona has become even more "Mexican" than ever. They envision that out of all these young people developing a critical thinking capacity and proud identity that they are going to become the future politicians of Arizona, and that's a scary thing. That's a scary thing for these guys. My God, man, we'll not only have undocumented workers who are poor and are a cheap labor source, we're going to have people now, who are getting into powerful positions in the future that are going to take away from what belongs to "us."

And so I think that's the bottom line here. They want to put a stop to this process of producing young leaders that are going to speak truth to power, and are going to make a difference in the future in terms of turning the tide against racism and other things that are negative in Arizona for Mexican people as a whole.

DB: Some of the people who have been banned are labeling this as sort of an inquisition. I thought that was maybe an overstatement but maybe now I'm thinking it's an understatement. I'm thinking about books that were banned. Can you imagine *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, *Occupied America*, a *History of Chicanos* by Rodolfo Acuña, a good friend of yours. We actually had the both of you on the show not too long ago. Talk about what these white people might be afraid of that's inside these beautiful books.

CM: Well, they are afraid of the truth. You know the truth hurts. And I think that, as I said earlier, the fact that scholarship like Rodolfo Acuña's incredible path-breaking book. He was the first one to put out a history, a true

history of America, in a sense that he documents, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the nature of our society and how, in fact, Mexican-Americans in particular have struggled for social justice throughout the history here of this country. And it is just remarkable that all this knowledge that Occupied America represents, they don't want to, they don't want to acknowledge it. They have problems with it, because Rody Acuña speaks the truth, as do all scholars, and Shakespeare speaks the truth.

Talking about this is really absurd, you know, when in a sense even people like Shakespeare, an English, a white guy who had the audacity for his time to speak truth to power of the British empire and put out the issue of colonization and oppression in that regard. Even there they couldn't tolerate that particular scholarship.

So basically it's an ideological struggle going on, it's a cultural war that is what's happening in Arizona between those who espouse the racist framework of analysis that white Eurocentric thought should be predominant in public education. And those of us who have struggled against that and have created a teaching now, a very definitely more truthful history of our society, and who have gone out of our way collectively to push forth a more, you might say, visionary process of education that is inclusive of all people, not just Mexican-American, but all people,

You know we don't do what we are accused of doing, dividing, being divisive, un-American. To the contrary, we have been most American in the context of continuing a process of creativity, intellectual thought that our ancestors started here in the Americas long before the white man arrived to conquer and engage in conquest and that is that we have ancestors that generated civilizations way back when, and our people as a whole have completed that process.

And I think we are remarkable in the context of what we represent as a people, in terms of not just being indigenous people but also inclusive of all the other dimensions of the reality that we represent, as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural people in our society. And this is what is not acknowledged by these people. They don't want to acknowledge that, it is scary to them. And rightly so, should be scary to them. So that's the whole issue now.

DB: I'm wondering Dr. Muñoz, I don't see your book on the list yet, *Youth, Identify, Power, the Chicano Movement* but I guess it's going to become a sort of a diploma that you put on your wall along with the other ones that you have. "I was banned in Tucson and I'm proud of it."

CM: Well, this is the thing that I tell people, that all these people, all these



banned books represent, I think, quite an honorable group of people. It's incredible. I feel kind of ...

DB: ...left out?

CM: I want that honor of being identified by this right-wing. So I hope I do get that honor down the road. But in the mean time I'm very proud of all these folks down in Arizona, how they have gone to bat, supported the defense of Mexican-American studies in Tucson.

DB: And it is troubling that this comes in the context of really, what is the new civil rights movement which is the rights of migrant workers, immigrant workers; the workers who do the hardest work in this country that we all depend on. It's a way to sort of build the borders higher even those who are citizens in this country, it's building walls around their lives and condemning their kids to a life less than they deserve.

CM: Yeah, I agree. I think what's happening is that there's an effort definitely to put down Mexican-Americans in Arizona there, to criminalize them, to put them as social outcasts, not worthy of being "American" unless, of course, they take the path of assimilation into the dominant culture, which, by the way, won't be so dominant pretty soon, down the road. This is what I made reference to earlier, the demographic revolution is a reality. Whether some white people like it or not we're going to be the majority in this country.

DB: Well, here in California whites are already the minority. Right?

CM: Exactly, right. Hawaii, and here ... so it's happening. Now mind you, we don't want to romanticize that fact because I always provide my critical analysis of it, the demographic revolution, in the context that unfortunately that is not necessarily going to be a consequence of profound change. And I cite President Obama as an example, big deal we have a black president, but where are we? We are worse off than we were during the Bush presidency.

So the point here is not so much to romanticize that people of color are going to take "power." It's a question of looking at the reality, that indeed, there is that potential to honor this diversity of American culture there will come about a more humanistic society that is going to place its emphasis on social justice and peace, and not war and violence, in our society and throughout the world.

DB: Now finally I want to get back to the revenge aspect of this action taken in Tucson and what it looks like, and what may need to happen in terms of a fight-back. We understand that white politicians took this action starting with the fact the Dolores Huerta was in Tucson, and talked about how white people hate

brown people, and white politicians there hate brown people. And those politicians never forgot it, they are in positions of power now, and they are punishing the people. Respond to that and what the fight-back, that you'd like to see, what it should look like?

CM: Well, I think there should be a revolution. This is the time for the revolution to emerge in the context of Dr. King's call for a revolution of values. I'm not talking here about any other Hollywood version, Hollywood revolution whatever, of violence and all that but rather a non-violent revolution as Dr. King called for that's going to transform the value system we have now in our society away from a process of individualization, what's best for the individual, what's best for the banks, what's best for the 1 percent but rather what is best for the 99 percent of our society.

That includes the majority of people of color, and poor whites, and the white middle class, as we know. So I think this is what I would like to see happen there. And I think also we have to definitely make clear that is not all white politicians, there are some good folks out there who are allies but it's a kind of white politician that we need to address this issue towards and that is the right-wing, Tea Party, white politician type of person who is out there doing the evil deeds that are taking place in Tucson, Arizona.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with the author at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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